

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:  
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

**INFORMANT: ANONYMOUS (INDIA)**

**INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL**

**DATE: MARCH 12, 2008**

**C = CHRISTOPH**

**A = ANONYMOUS**

**Tape 08.23**

C: If you could just state, Anonymous 4, the approximate location where you live in Lowell, and talk a little bit about your ethnic background and your family's migration history to the U.S., to Lowell.

A: I live on Middlesex Street in Middlesex Village. I was born in India and I was raised in India. I came here when I was thirteen, in the beginning of the eighth grade. First we landed in New Jersey, then we stayed in Pennsylvania because my brother wanted to go to an engineering school, and a state school so we moved to Lowell so he could attend UMass Lowell.

C: Were there other factors that attracted your family to Lowell?

A: Not really, it was pretty much that he wanted to go to school here, and it was cheaper, and we had a couple of relatives here with families.

C: So, you're part of the Gujarati community? Do you got to the....

A: I go to the temple on Steadman Street.

C: So you first came to New Jersey and stayed there how long?

A: For three or four months, because we came in May and it was like a vacation period, so we stayed there until September. And then we went to Pennsylvania.

C: Whereabouts in Pennsylvania?

A: Allentown. It was a very rich community, very nice.

C: Allentown has sort of gone through the roof; it used to be a poor mining town...

A: It's really nice; it has a nice schooling system and everything.

C: What were your first impressions when you came to the U.S.?

A: At first, I kind of wanted to go back. When I was in India, I wanted to come here so badly, but when I came here, I had no friends, I didn't know English, and it was really hard to stay and communicate with my cousins who were born here. Back then they were little and didn't speak very good Gujarati, just English, it was really hard. But then I went to school for a month because we came in May and school was still open until June and there I learned how to communicate with people, like call the professors by name, where in India we used to call them Madam or Sir. So, it was kind of hard at first, but then as time passed by it got easier.

C: Were there a lot of other Indians at your high school or were there Indian people in your high school when you were in New Jersey?

A: When I was in New Jersey I was in middle school...

C: Ah, yes, sorry...middle school...

A: There were only two or three people that were Indian and they weren't even Gujarati, they were from the south and didn't do a good job speaking Gujarati, so I had to communicate in English.

C: Was it hard for you? Do you feel like people picked on you for being from India, or was it not an issue?

A: It wasn't an issue, people were more accepting. They kind of thought it was cool being an Indian and attending school with them. They appreciated the fact that I didn't know English, but I was still in school with them.

C: Interesting.....so did you connect more with non-Indian kids while you were in New Jersey?

A: I tried to make Indian friends, but it was just kind of impossible, because the Indian kids kind of thought of themselves as being higher than I was because of where I came from in India. The American kids were more accepting compared to Indian kids.

C: So why did the Indian kids think of themselves as higher, was it because, maybe an ignorant western question, caste or just because they felt they were here longer and spoke the language better?

A: Yeah, that's what they thought. They were born here or were here for a longer time and so they thought they were smarter than I was. That's what I got out of it. Where on the other hand it might have been, "Well, that's cool, she knows a couple of the languages," where they only know English and the Spanish that they learned in school.

C: When you came to the U.S., did you have any preconceived ideas about what America would be like and when you got here did that change a little bit, your image of the United States?

A: Not really, because I used to hear from my relatives that there are a lot of opportunities in America, and it's really easy to live there, school is easier....and when I came here found that all that was true. Compared to India there are a lot of opportunities here and it's a lot different, so I kinda had an idea of what I was going into and it all came true.

C: So now maybe let's turn to your life in Lowell.... You came here how long ago because of your brother's education?

A: Well, I think we came here seven years ago. Maybe five years ago.

C: So you said you live on Middlesex? What part of Middlesex Village, I know there's a lot of Indians living down there and a couple of Indian restaurants, two south India restaurants, and one or two Indian stores in that neighborhood. Do you feel like you live in an Indian neighborhood or a mixed neighborhood?

A: I feel like I live in a mixed neighborhood, because where I live there aren't a lot of Indians. They're further down, north towards Nashua, and I live right next to the CVS and the Market Basket, so there's not a lot of Indians there, there are a lot of Spanish people, a lot of Brazilians where I live.

C: And then a little further up the street....

A: There are more Indians.

C: Are they mostly all Gujarati or are they mostly south Indian?

A: They're mostly south Indian. There are a couple Gujarati families.

C: Is there much interaction between the Gujaratis and the south Indians? I mean India is such a big place, there are so many languages.....

A: I don't really know, because when we lived in the apartments when we first came here, we didn't have a lot of Gujarati neighbors, and my mom and dad both were friends with the south Indian families, and they did interact, but now it looks like not as much, because we moved away. I don't know, my parents just stopped talking to south Indians.

C: So where did you initially move then?

A: Onto Westford Street, in the apartments by Stedman Street.

C: Oh, so there were a lot more south Indians in that neighborhood. So, do you work while you're in school? Or, where do you go to school, if you don't mind?

A: I go to Massachusetts College of Pharmacy in Boston.

C: And do you work as well, or do you focus on school right now?

A: I work during summer and Christmas break. I work at CVS pharmacy.

C: What do your parents do professionally?

A: My mom's a cashier at Wal-Mart and my dad currently doesn't have a job.

C: It sounds like your family has made some tough choices, they moved up here and it sounds like they're working hard to make it work out for your brother and you. I guess that's a very poorly asked question!

A: Yeah, they do expect a lot out of me, because my brother just graduated from UMass Lowell and he has a pretty good job, so they're thinking that if he is able to do it then I should be able to do it, because I came at a younger age than him. He came here when he was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and it was really hard for him as well, so they're thinking that if he's able to pull off graduation and finding a really good job then they are expecting a lot more from me. They do want me to get straight A's and be on top of school and graduate.

C: Do you sometimes find that hard, or do you want to do it anyway?

A: I do want to do it anyway, so the pressure that they put on me, it actually helps me, cuz I know that if I don't get straight A's or I don't do too well than they're going to be disappointed, so it kind of helps me that they're pushing me to do really well in school.

C: Although pharmacy work, the job market is pretty good for that right now I understand, so that should help.

A: Yeah, but it's really hard to get through the school.

C: I used to work as an EMT, so I know being in the medical field is very tough and there are a lot of things you have to pay attention to.

A: And it gets more competitive every year as you go along. For Instance, my class right now has to maintain a 2.5 GPA; the classes of 2010 and 2011 have to maintain a 2.2 GPA. The upcoming classes have to maintain a 2.9 GPA, so they're stepping up the GPA system. It's so

competitive, because first of all they accept so many kids and the curriculum is so hard....at my school specifically they accept whoever applies and then they kick them out, and the next year they accept more kids and more get kicked out because the competition is so high, the exams are so hard and everything. Every year they accept more kids and then kick out some, so I have to make sure I'm on top of my things and at least have a 3.0 GPA.

C: Where do you usually shop for food in Lowell, do you go to any of the Indian stores or do you just go to Market Basket, or a combination?

A: Yeah, mostly Market Basket getting fruits and vegetables and stuff, but if we need something Indian, like Indian spices or something like that, than we go to Indian stores. It's usually my mom and dad will go. I don't really go. Or they go to get movies.

C: Which store does your family go to or does it matter? Do they go to all of them?

A: It doesn't matter, they go to all of them, whichever one is cheaper.

C: That works for me! I know when I went to visit you guys at the temple; a lot of you wore the traditional sari. Do you only wear them to the temple or for weddings and festivals or do you wear them around the house or for school, or do you usually wear western clothes?

A: Yeah, I usually wear Western clothes, even my mom, unless we have people coming over for dinner or something then we dress up, but usually it's just western clothes.

C: Is it the same with your mother?

A: Yes, unless she's going to temple, she mostly wears western clothes because she works at Wal-Mart and they have a dress code now.

C: Oh, so they wouldn't allow it? How about other women in the Indian community? Do older people tend to wear the sari more than younger people?

A: Older people do, like my grandmother, and I believe all the grandmothers...they all wear saris because I think they believe it's not appropriate to wear western clothes, I don't know. It could be just because they grew up in India and lived most of their lives there, so it's probably hard to come here and hard for them to accept.

C: I think that holds true for other immigrant groups, they come here and feel that their traditions are more appropriate for them. Do you still have relatives in India?

A: Yep, I have grandparents in India, my dad's parents.

C: And your mother's parents, they live in the U.S.?

A: Yeah, my mom's dad died, but my mom's mom is still alive, so she's here.

C: Does she live with you guys or with someone else?

A: She lives with my uncle.

C: Okay. Do you communicate a lot with your family in India, or not so much?

A: It depends, I call my grandparents every time I come home from Boston. Relatives, like my mom's uncles, I don't usually call them, only once in a while, and I really don't know what to say to them if I do call them on the phone, so it's just my grandparents. All my relatives here I do call often, check up on them and see what they're up to.

C: Have you been able to go back to India at all?

A: I went back in 2004 and I'm going back this May.

C: Oh great, do you like going back?

A: Yeah, it's fun and you don't have to worry about anything like work. And I get pampered a lot, just because I come from here.

C: Is there anything you noticed that changed?

A: Yes, there have been a lot of changes, it's crazy. They have a lot of freedom now, compared to when I was there, and they pretty much celebrate all of the holidays that we do here like Valentine's day, Mother's day and Father's day, stuff like that. They all have cell phones and text messaging, and even kids in high school would be sitting in class text messaging each other, just like what happens here. They have their professor's phone numbers and all that stuff, it's just so forward, I don't know.

C: So, globalization has kicked in there too, but I find it really interesting that they have western style holidays like Valentine's Day.

A: They have parties for New Year's Day; it's really big now too.

C: Where do you consider your home, is it Lowell or the United States, or India, or is it hard for you to say, or is it a little bit of both?

A: Right now if someone asks me, "Where are you from?" The first thing I answer is Lowell because I've been living here, but then if they say, "No, were you originally born in India or here?" Then it kicks in and I should have said India, but I mean I like to think of it this way, that now that I've been here and I'm a citizen of the United States it's just better to accept this as my home than say India.

C: Do you feel more comfortable saying, "I live in Lowell." As compared to "I live in India."? It's a personal decision. And the reason why I'm asking you is to see how you feel and I was wondering if sometimes you feel guilty for saying you're from Lowell because there might be expectations from other people that you should say you're from India?

A: Yeah, sometimes it occurred to me when I first met my friends from school, when they asked me where I was from and I said Lowell, but I thought afterwards that I should have said India. I grew up there and I learned everything there and then I came here only seven years ago, so that doesn't just make it my home, but otherwise I never really thought about it in great detail. It just comes out Lowell.

C: It often happens with things like that, that we don't have time to think about it in great detail, I understand. I get this too because I'm an immigrant too and people will say, "You talk kinda funny, where are you from?" I say Lowell because I've lived in the U.S. since I was eighteen and I'm now in my mid-thirty's, so I've now lived longer in the U.S. than where I came from in Europe, so it's hard, I totally understand. There are issues of identity and belonging that are really hard to answer.

Do you still speak Gujarati with your family?

A: Yeah, I do.

C: And English obviously at school. How much do you think you use your Gujarati still?

A: As much as I use my English, because I communicate with my grandmother and my grandparents in Gujarati, and my dad in Gujarati. My mom understands English and she will respond back in English, but my dad still uses Gujarati. And sometimes even at school, sometimes I'll use Gujarati with my classmates who are Gujarati as well, so it's frequent.

C: So you're leading a bilingual life. Do you feel that the fact that your father doesn't speak English very well has hurt him professionally, in terms of jobs?

A: No it doesn't. I think he knows his English, it's just he never considered speaking back to his kids in English, because he does expect us to know Gujarati because we grew up there.

C: So for your dad it's really important that you speak in Gujarati with him?

A: If I ask him something in English, he'll respond back, it's not like he won't respond because he wants us to speak Gujarati, I think it's just because he's been speaking Gujarati a long time and he never thought about it.

C: Let me ask you this question? I don't know if you plan on having children or not, but if you would have children, would you want them to learn Gujarati too?

A: I actually would. Because I feel like even though they would probably be born here and raised here, it's still important for them to know they come from India. And it's really important for them to learn their background and at least be able to understand Gujarati. Like if my mom or dad would try to talk to them in Gujarati they should be able to understand and respond back, because that will happen.

C: Do you go much to the temple on Steadman Street or since you're going to school away now...

A: I try to come back for the big events, but not every weekend.

C: So what are some of the events that you are trying to come back for?

A: Like Diwali, which is popular and everyone knows about it, and there's another one coming up this weekend Holi, and there's National Kite Day, and we celebrate all those and there's many more.

C: What's Holi about?

A: It's a festival of colors.

C: Is there any special symbolic meaning to it?

A: There is a long story behind it, but no one talks about it anymore, they just want to have fun. There are a lot of games for the kids, but I don't think the kids would know if you asked them.

C: I read somewhere, and I don't know if it's true because I read a lot written by academics that isn't necessarily correct, and there could also be regional differences, but is Diwali more important to the Indians in the United States than it is to the Indians in India? Is that correct? Or was it always an important holiday in some regions, but not in others?

A: It's always been important because it's the New Year, it's just like Christmas, and it's a celebration. But I guess these days, in India, because they get a month off like we get a month off for Christmas and stuff...I don't know if it's true or not, but maybe that's why they don't think of it as important, it's just a holiday, a chance to have fireworks and have fun...But back then when I was there we always celebrated it and felt it important because there's a lot more to Diwali than what people know. We have an extra seven or eight day celebration where we do different prayers to different gods. I'm trying to think how I can explain in English and it's kind of hard. It's the same as with kids over here with Christmas, it's all about getting gifts and getting time off school, but there's a meaning behind Christmas.... It's kind of like that. But over here it's more important because over there everyone is doing it, in all the towns, so it just comes naturally, but over here it's once a year and it really gets exciting. Yeah, we get to see all our relatives, because here most of our relatives have dinners and get together, and they get to see everyone that they haven't gotten to see the whole year, so it's more important here. But back in

India they see each other at least once a month, so they don't really understand the importance I guess.

C: Westerners always complain about the commercialization of Christmas, do you feel like that's what's going on with that holiday too a little bit? Or that it becomes more about the gifts than the actual meaning of it? Is that fair?

A: I think it's getting there. It's more about having fun rather than understanding what it's about.

C: But it's obviously an important day because you have your family dinners and then go to the temple, right?

A: Yeah.

C: Then you have the National Kite Day?

A: Yeah.

C: What's that about?

A: There's a story about that also...it's in January, on a certain day and on that day the sun comes out and brings Spring and then we fly kites and it goes away...it's kind of symbolic, I don't know..It's hard to explain! But it's another holiday where we have a national holiday and everyone gets together, and they fly kites and eat and enjoy.

C: That's really interesting, now I want to find out more about it. I've got to do research on the National Kite Day now! Other than visiting India have you been on other vacations, or done any other traveling in the U.S. or....

A: I don't know if it was a vacation, but last summer we all traveled to places...our guru, he came over and he's really old, and if we went to India to try to see him it would be really hard because of all the people, so when he came here we had a better chance of...you know...he's very sacred...and we had a better chance of seeing him and doing his doshun[?] and stuff, so we just wanted to go and get as much of his doshun[?] as we could.

C: Is a doshun[?] what a Christian would call a blessing?

A: Yes.

C: So that enabled you to travel a little bit, since usually you travel to visit family?

A: Yeah, so I've been to South Carolina and a couple of other places.

C: And that's all where you have family?

A: Yes, I also went to Ohio last summer, but that was for a wedding, and I'm going to Ohio this summer also for a wedding.

C: Whereabouts in Ohio?

A: Columbus.

C: Oh yes, there's a sizeable Indian community there.

A: So we went to Columbus and then we're going again. When I was back in India, we traveled a lot more. We were younger and school wasn't a big deal, and plus we had enough money to afford going to places, like I've been to Nepal and Lake Kashmir and stuff. Then we had money and time because my dad had his own business so he could just take days off whenever he wanted and my mom didn't work, so we didn't have to worry about days off of work and all that stuff.

C: That makes sense. Are you going to be traveling this summer alone or is your whole family going?

A: I'm going with my parents; my brother can't come because he has work. He just started last summer.

C: So he's working as an engineer now?

A: Yes, he works at Raytheon.

C: So basically much of your community life centers around the temple, is there an Indian association of Lowell that you might belong to or be active with?

A: No, only the temple.

C: In college, is there an Asian student association you're active with?

A: Yeah, there is but it's all corrupt. I attended for a year but stopped going. All they do is try to get your money. You know college kids. They try to get money to throw parties. If they did a good event like Diwali, then I would try to stop by, but I'm not really active in an Indian club.

C: What do you do for entertainment? You mentioned that you watched Bollywood films, only with your family, or is that something you would do on your own too?

A: I sometimes do it on my own, it depends on how bored I am, but mostly hang out with friends or go to movies here.

C: Do you mostly listen to Indian music? American music? Or both?

A: It's both. I know some people think I'm weird for listening to Indian music; they were born here so they wouldn't know, but if they grew up in India then they would understand that it's really important. I think they just don't understand the meanings behind the music, that's why they prefer not to listen to it and they think it's stupid, but I obviously can understand the music, so...

C: And they might discover it when they're in their thirties.... Are there any radio stations or television stations that you like? Or TV shows you like?

A: There are a lot of TV shows I like! They're all American though. Indian shows... we don't have Indian channels, so I can't keep track. I watch "One Tree Hill" and all those dramatic shows, and comedies like "Family Guy."

C: I think "Family Guy" is the most popular one amongst students.

A: It's a good one because it's always on, even if you turn on the TV in the middle of the afternoon and it's just funny. I also watch a lot of CSI Miami...I started watching it over the summer and I can't stop now.

C: So now you're hooked! That's funny. Are you following the politics in Lowell at all?

A: No.

C: Obviously, there's not a single Indian person on the city council, but would that be something you'd like to see in the future or do you just not care about politics?

A: I do care about politics. But I don't really follow politics, just big elections, like right now.

C: So are you following the presidential election at all?

A: Yeah.

C: Have you experienced any tensions between ethnic groups in Lowell at all? Has anyone given you funny looks or problems because you're Indian? Or have you noticed any tensions between the south Indians and Gujarati at all?

A: No nothing like that. I think people are too used to being around Indians and having them in the school, kids are around Indian people and interacting and I guess people just accept it.

C: Which is a good thing, at least I would say so.... We're doing this study for the Lowell National Historical Park, and part of the reason they are having us do this study is because they are trying to reach out to the newer immigrant groups. Have you been to the National Park downtown because of school?

A: No.

C: Okay, so you've never been...period....Do you feel like when you go to the Indian stores, or you go to the temple, do you feel like the Park is doing any outreach with you guys, or have you even heard of the National Park in Lowell?

A: No, not in my temple.

C: Okay, so for example, if there was an exhibit of the history of the Indian people in Lowell would you be interested in going downtown to check out that exhibit?

A: Yeah, definitely.

C: The Park helps organize a few things like the Southeast Asian Water Festival, I don't know if you've heard about that, but it's this big festival on the river and it's quite the party, or the Lowell Folk Festival...have you ever gone to any of these?

A: No.

C: Thank-you so much for taking the time to talk to us.